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Educational Studies Senior Seminar

Trinity College Athletics:
A Look at Perceptions of High Profile Male Athletes at Trinity College

Introduction:

Many people would argue that Division one sports have become more of a business than a form of healthy amateur competition. In the recently published book The Game of Life the authors state that college and university presidents, administrators, and trustees are all questioning “whether we as a society want colleges to expend resources on athletics that seem less and less “amateur.”¹ Students participating in high profile sports such as football or basketball at the division one level are no longer perceived by the American public as *student-athletes*. Rather, many college sports are viewed as a stepping-stone for athletes who will soon become professionals. It is well known that division one colleges recruit and give admissions advantages for student’s to play for their team. This means that they may not have be as academically qualified as the average student at the school they attend. Since this seems to be common knowledge among students and fans at schools it may have an affect on the way they perceive one another. At the same time many students at Trinity College participate in varsity athletic

¹ Bowen and Shulman. The Game of Life Princeton University Press, 2001 (p. xv, prelude)

programs on the division III level. Many students may believe that athletes are given similar or at least some sort of admissions advantage despite the fact that Trinity's athletic programs (with the exception of squash) are in the NCAA's third division. In a preliminary report to the presidents of the New England Small Colleges Athletic Conference (NESCAC) Bowen, Levin, Shulman, and Cambell state that based upon grade point average, and SAT scores high profile male athletes under perform in comparison to their peers.² However they fail to realize the importance of campus culture in the NESCAC by not collecting any data on how athletes and students perceive each other on campus. This information may help inform the public whether or not those actually experiencing a liberal arts education believe that this is an issue which needs to be addressed. The college certainly believes that athletics are important as the Trinity College athletics homepage states the following: "Trinity College embraces intercollegiate athletics as an educational experience that is an integral component of the academic mission of the College. [Trinity] attracts a diverse group of student-athletes who will contribute academically, athletically, and socially to the life of our campus." Since a major difference between most NCAA division one schools and Trinity College is the size of the undergraduate student body athletes do not need to be seen on television in order for it to be known by many that they are involved in a varsity sport. Also, a smaller student body allows for the development of close academic and personal relationships among peers and is considered a major part of the learning process. Sarah Levin states "the schools with big-time athletic programs face a host of other issues and pressures...the educational issues associated with college sports today are in fact more

² Bowen, Levin, Shulman, Campbell. Working Draft: *The Academic-Athletic Divide* The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2001.

important at the liberal arts colleges.”³ Since a significant percentage of students at Trinity participate in varsity athletics it is very important to find out what in fact are the perceptions between the two groups and if they do actually affect the way students at Trinity live and learn. This pilot study hopes to discover what perceptions do students have of high profile male athletes at Trinity College and what perceptions do high profile male athletes feel students hold of them? Also, do these perceptions affect social and academic interactions at Trinity?

Primary Sources:

Eight Trinity College seniors have been used for the purpose of my pilot study. Four of these students are high profile male athletes. A High profile athlete is defined as a person who has received a varsity letter in football, ice hockey, basketball, or baseball.⁴ For the purposes of this study these athletes will be in their senior year. The remaining four students will be students who do not participate in varsity athletics and have never received a varsity letter in any sport. These four students will also be in their senior year at Trinity.

Methodology:

For the purposes of this study eight in depth interviews have been conducted with Trinity College Seniors. Seniors are the most experienced with life on campus therefore they offer the best data to help inform us of perceptions that could exist on the Trinity College campus as a whole. Each of the four high profile male athletes were randomly selected from senior rosters of the football, basketball, and hockey teams. A name was chosen, the athlete was contacted and if they chose to participate they were included.

³ [Http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/game/htm](http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/game/htm).

⁴ Bowen and Shulman The Game of Life Princeton University Press, 2001.(p 31.)

High profile have been chosen for the purposes of this study because they are likely to be the most visible athletes on campus, and perceptions are likely to affect them the most because they are often identified as athletes by their physical appearance. The remaining four senior students (two male and two female) agreed to participate upon being recruited at The Bistro on campus. If a student met the criteria for the study they were asked to participate, the four who agreed have been included in this study. Both male and females were chosen in order to better represent the Trinity College population as a whole. All participants remain anonymous by name and the sport in which they participate. All interviews were semi-structured. Broad questions were asked in an attempt to receive the most honest answers from participants. They were asked to expand on their response as thoroughly as possible. Each interview lasted approximately 35-45 minutes depending on the length of the answers given by participants.

Thesis:

After interviews with four students at Trinity College it was clear that these students believed high profile male athletes received special advantages in the admissions process. At the same time they did not believe that high profile male athletes as a whole were less qualified than the average student based on grade point average and SAT scores. Students did believe that stereotypes on campus that are associated with high profile male athletes particularly when an athlete is physically larger than the average student. They believe that these perceptions may have an affect on academic interactions at Trinity, but do not affect social interactions. High profile male athletes feel that students perceive them to have received special advantages in the admissions process and actually agree that this is true in their own case, and they feel that students perceive them

to be less qualified than the average student based on grade point average and SAT scores. Also, they believe that students at Trinity College often stereotype them. High profile male athletes do not believe they fit these stereotypes themselves and do not believe that they affect social or academic interactions between the two groups.

Evidence:

It was clear that high profile male athletes and students had similar responses to each other when answering questions during interviews. The two groups were definitely aware of the fact that stereotypes do exist for high profile male athletes on campus. Students described certain stereotypes on campus and athletes were aware of these stereotypes and gave similar explanations of what they were. When asked if students believed high profile male athletes received special advantages in the admissions process three out of the four students explained that they thought this was true. They stated that they do in fact assume something about high profile male athletes acceptance to Trinity. Students explained that they formed these perceptions from what they had heard from the athletes themselves. One student explained “Yeah, no doubt they do (receive special advantages)... I know kids on teams who I knew only got in here because they play they played a particular sport. Of course I wasn’t in the admissions office at the time, but I couldn’t count the number of times I’ve heard someone say that they wouldn’t have gotten in here without their sport.” During a second interview another student gave a similar answer. “Sure they do. I don’t know if there are sports scholarships here, but there are spots set aside for athletes. People have told me and athletes have told me. Every once in a while you’ll here an athlete say they wouldn’t have gotten in here if it weren’t for their sport.”

Although students did believe that high profile male athletes did in fact receive advantages in the admissions process they did not make the statement that the athletes were academically less qualified than the average student based on grade point average and SAT scores. Students did not feel that they could make a blanket statement as to the level of qualification for all high profile male athletes. Three out of the four students interviewed did not believe that the athletes were any less qualified. Only one out of the four students explained they believed this was the case. The student believed that there was a direct correlation between academic advantages and academic qualifications. She stated, “they’re not as qualified in terms of G.P.A. and SAT scores go. They can’t be because they do receive those advantages in admissions...if they had better grades I think they would be at a better school.” A second student simply said that he had no idea, that he had never heard someone discussing their prior academic records like he had heard athletes say that they wouldn’t have been accepted without their sport. The last two students simply did not perceive athletes to be any less qualified as a whole. Also they made reference to the SAT’s being a poor measure of a person’s academic ability. One student stated “I think they are as qualified as the average student...I applied to Bates, and they don’t even use the SAT’s anymore. Good scores don’t necessarily predict that someone will succeed in college.

During interviews students explained a few stereotypes that are associated with athletes on campus. They thought that these stereotypes generally stem from a societal perception of athletes. The most prominent stereotype associated with high profile male athletes on Trinity’s campus was the “meathead” stereotype. Students all gave somewhat similar definitions of the term meathead when asked to further explain the stereotype.

From the four responses the following definition of a meathead applied by students can be paraphrased as: An athlete who does not do as much school work and just focuses on the sport they are playing rather than the academics. A meathead is usually physically larger than the average student and spends more time in the gym. Three out of four students believed that the meathead stereotype was the stereotype most associated with high profile athletes. One female stated: “I think there is a correlation, especially with the more talented players. Although I don’t think that you’d look at the most successful kids on the squash team and call them a meathead, but that is probably just because they are smaller. I think meathead arises from the fact that they do play a sport, and people perceive them as less articulate than they are...there is also the physical thing, they are big beefy guys.” All three of these students did not believe the term carried much of a negative connotation on Trinity’s campus. Two students admitted it was a term they had not only heard the word on campus but had used it also. The following statement shows that the word does may not hold as much negativity at Trinity: “To me a meathead doesn’t have much of a negative connotation at Trinity. I’ve seen meatheads at different schools who have been big, dumb and violent...Meatheads at Trinity seem to be more good hearted kids who may certainly an intellectual capacity that they might not like to let on. ”

The four high profile male athletes interview all believed that students perceive them to have received special advantages in the admissions process. Athletes also stated that this was in fact true for them personally. The first athlete interviewed states: “Students believe it. It’s a well known fact that athletes receive advantages. Coming in to Trinity I didn’t fit the academic qualifications. It wasn’t a huge stretch, but I know I

wouldn't have gotten in here if it weren't for athletics." The second athlete gave a similar response, "students think kids get in at a better rate because they play a sport...It's somewhat true, It's undeniable athletics has somewhat of a pull in admissions...I know I wasn't up to so called 'Trinity standards.'" The third and fourth response with regard to athletes was somewhat different than the first two. In the third interview the athlete shed light on the fact that it is difficult to know who in fact has received special advantages because of their athletic ability. "Students think we only got in because we play a sport, and sometimes they're wrong. It's the same for athletes though. I'm not sure most people (athletes) know they got in because of the sport they play, they could be assuming too. What I mean is I would say "yes I got in because I play a sport," but there could have been other factors that were equally important in making the decision." This statement shows that students and the athletes themselves may hold perceptions that are in fact false. Neither students nor athletes made the statement that they thought all high profile male athletes received special admissions advantages and one athlete stated the fact that he was not "a huge stretch" for admissions to accept. This shows that students and athletes acknowledge there is a variance in advantages that could range from no pull in admissions at all to an undetermined but distinct advantage.

The high profile male athletes interviewed believed that students perceived them to be less qualified than the average student at Trinity. Athletes did not give any specific examples of clear evidence or instances that would cause them to believe this. Rather they believed they were perceived this way due to the general stereotypes associated with

high profile athletes that exist in society at large. The following statements from three different athletes indicate that this is the case:

“Students probably think we are less prepared before we get here. The general stereotype in society is that college athletes don’t care as much. That we kind of just try to get by.”

“Students think we are less qualified because they know we wouldn’t have gotten in here without our sport.”

“Being less qualified is something that students would think is true of the high profile athletes. So many people talk about it openly, it’s sort of an accomplishment. I don’t have a problem admitting my grades and scores weren’t good enough to get in here by themselves. I don’t think it is something many people hold against you at Trinity.”

All four athletes admitted that they were in fact less qualified than the average student in terms of grade point average and SAT scores. They did not believe that this was a measure of academic performance however. An athlete described the academic performance within his class in relation to academic qualifications. “There are kids who don’t do great, some that do well, and some that do great. It’s hard to make a blanket statement about everyone. I know that of the guys in my class there are probably more kids who are great students than there are really bad students. I’m almost sure everyone is going to graduate on time, regardless of how they did before they got here.”

High profile male athletes did not believe that they really fit the existing stereotypes despite agreeing that they did receive academic advantages and were less qualified than the average Trinity student. Also they did not believe that perceptions or stereotypes of students had any affect on social and academic interaction at Trinity. A

social interaction was defined as any interaction between the two groups, which did not involve academics. An academic interaction was any interaction in which academic coursework was discussed, whether it is inside or outside of the classroom. One athlete with the following description of interaction best described the athlete's opinion's concerning social interaction between students on campus: "There is a lot of integration between the athletes and students or a lot more than people think. Athletes are more visible on campus, and maybe make themselves more visible. But most interactions and attitudes of students and athletes are the same and they interact more than people probably think." All four of the athletes also believed that academic interactions were not affected by stereotypes and perceptions. However, two out of the four students did mention faculty and with regard to academic perceptions. "I know a lot of kids on sports teams who will hide the fact that they are athletes from faculty because faculty especially probably have those stereotypes. Whether that is justified, I don't know. On a lot of campuses there is an emphasis on sports. I don't like to let professors know I play a sport, but I would never hide that from a student." None of the athletes had any experiences or could recall of any experience where they felt or thought that an athlete was less likely to be involved in an academic interaction as a result of student perceptions or stereotypes.

On the other hand, students did feel that stereotypes might affect the academic interactions between the two groups. The following statements from students illustrate this: "It might sometimes, an athlete will say something and people will think 'oh he's just a meathead.' I think I've seen that happen. Sometimes its obvious who a recruited athlete is and people might prejudge them." This statement indicates that the student

feels that athletes may sometimes be affected because they can easily be identified as “recruited,” and that they may be prejudged as a meathead or someone who’s comments may not be considered to be of as much value. A second student response describes a similar occurrence, but also notes that for those times that a stereotype is reinforced by comments there are many times when stereotypes are subverted: “I can think of isolated instances where somebody who would certainly fit the meathead stereotype has said something so stupid that it definitely reinforced the stereotype, but I can also think of many times when someone has said something to subvert the stereotype.” Students did not believe however that social interactions were affected by perceptions of high profile athletes. The following statement best summarizes student responses, all of whom believed that social interactions were not affected by perceptions. “I would say the relationship between athletes and non athletes is not dissimilar from all non athletes or all students. I don’t think that the fact a person is an athlete at Trinity really informs the relationship they have with other students. A lot of times, especially since so many students on campus are athletes, they tend to congregate with other athletes. However, I don’t think that it in any way excludes non-athletic students. Perhaps there is a certain personality type. Someone who is more outgoing or has more confidence may tend to associate more with high profile athletes. Those people with similar personalities will associate with that group, but there is no divide.”

Conclusion:

This pilot study shows that there are students on campus believe that high profile male athletes receive advantages in admissions, however do not believe that these athletes are less qualified academically. They also acknowledge that certain stereotypes

do exist, and these stereotypes may affect academic interactions but not social interactions. The athletes interviewed believe that this is in fact how they are perceived on campus. The only difference being the athletes stated that they were academically less qualified in terms of G.P.A. and SAT scores, while students did not believe that this was in fact the case. Athletes did not feel that they fit stereotypes that exist on campus, and do not feel that perceptions or stereotypes affect social or academic interactions. This pilot study shows us that the relationship between high profile male athletes and students is a healthy one. Students did not have over exaggerated perceptions of the high profile male athletes on campus, nor did the athletes feel that they were perceived unfairly. In order to prove that social and academic interactions are not affected, as the athletes described a methodology measuring the two factors must be introduced. The same goes for the student's claim that academic interactions may be affected, but social interactions are not. In the future it is important to keep in my how those experiencing the liberal arts education truly feel about the issues that surround them. There has been plenty of controversy over the claims made by Shulman and Bowen in The Game of Life concerning intercollegiate athletics. Further research on the topic, especially when applied to NESCAC colleges must take into account the thoughts of the members who live and work and those communities on a daily basis. This study has been an attempt in doing just that.

Bibliography

-Bowen, W., and Shulman, J. The Game of Life Princeton University Press, 2001: p xv; p. 31

-Bowen, W., Levin, S., Shulman, J., Campbell, C. Working Draft: *The Academic-Athletic Divide*. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, 2001: p 2.

-Website: [Http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/game/htm](http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/educ/game/htm). 11/16/02.